Men, Insects and Spiders

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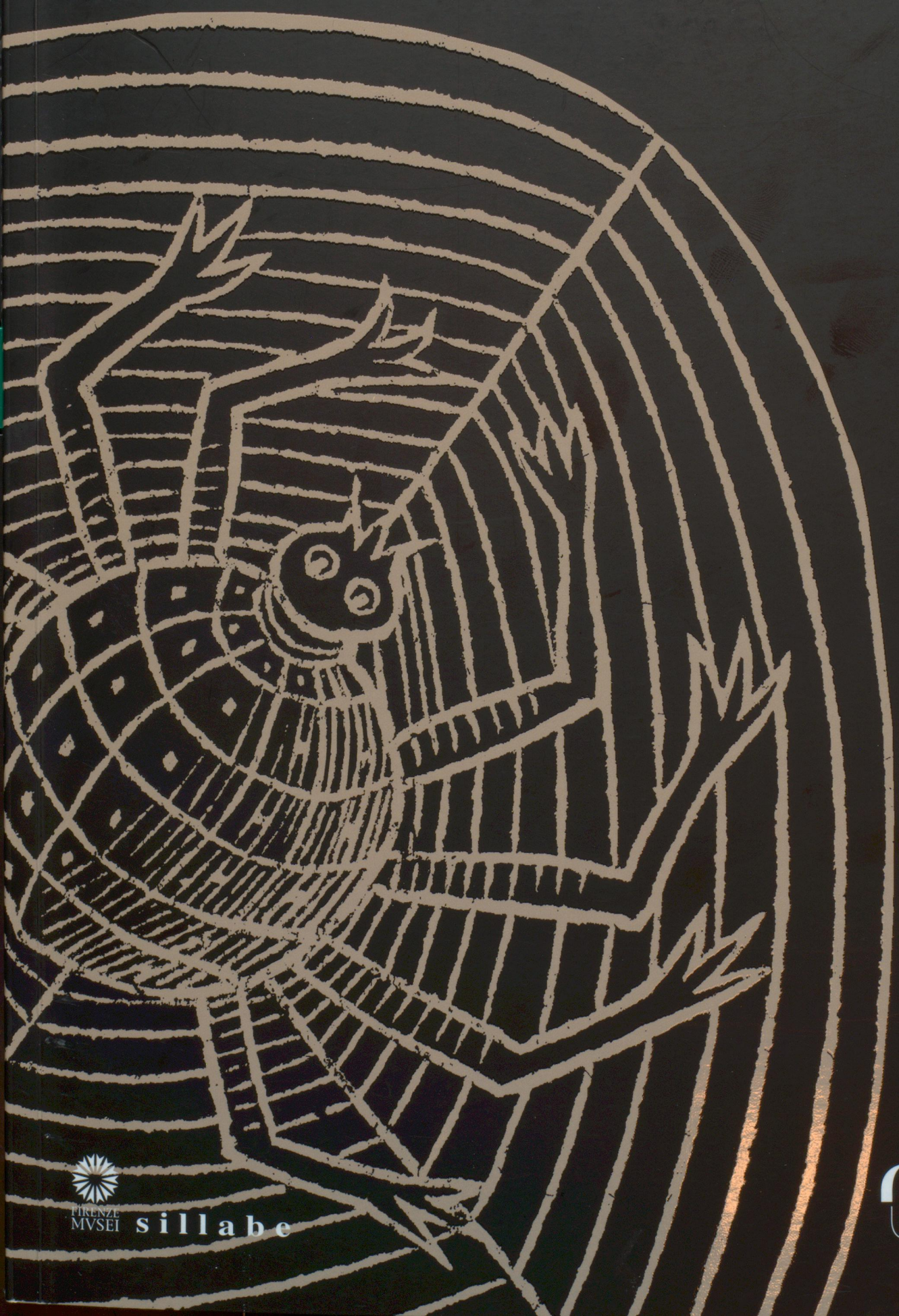

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LE GALLE
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LE GALLERIE DEGLI UFFIZI

ANIMALIA FASHION

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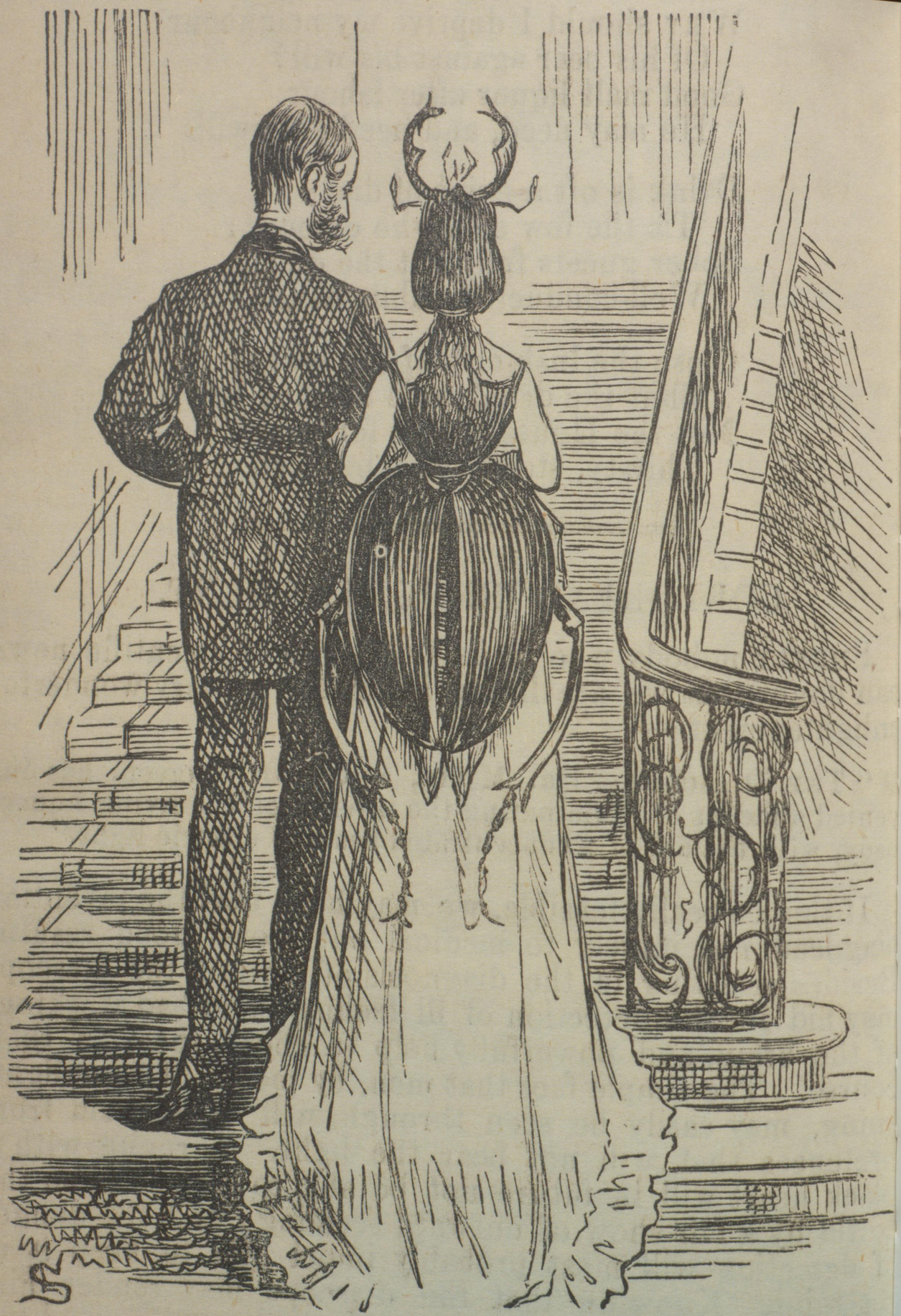

Men, Insects and Spiders

Patricia Lurati

> When Gregor Samsa woke one morning from troubled dreams, he found himself transformed right there in his bed into some sort of monstrous insect. He was lying on his back – which was hard, like a carapace – and when he raised his head a little he saw his curved brown belly segmented by rigid arches atop which the blanket, already slipping, was just barely managing to cling. His many legs, pitifully thin compared to the rest of him, waved helplessly before his eyes.

Franz Kafka could not have written a more powerful beginning to the *Metamorphosis* (1915). He transformed the story's protagonist into a monstrous and abnormal insect, cruelly imprisoned in a revolting armour plate that, besides making it hard for him to move, caused terror that led to disgust on the part of his relatives. So, the unlucky fellow decided to starve himself to death. The insect, conceived by the Czech writer as a prison in the form of an exoskeleton, was certainly nothing new: Victorian Gothic literature had already appropriated that metaphor for diversity, alienation, evil feelings and action. Richard Marsh's horror novel *The Beetle* (1897), describes a supernatural being that, before physically and sexually attacking men and women or plotting against pre-established social norms, turned into an enormous beetle; the character garnered such success as to eclipse the coeval work by Bram Stoker, *Dracula*, named after the main character who, like a parasite, sucked his victims' blood. It would seem that the idea of menacing beetles pervaded popular thought at the time. In April 1870 the satirical magazine *Punch* published a cartoon to discredit the campaign for women's rights. Above the caption *Suffrage for Both Sexes* a man is portrayed from behind with a woman whose head and back look like a large beetle (fig. 1). Although they were often perceived as threatening or disgusting parasites, insects began to fascinate British society thanks in part to Charles Darwin's naturalistic studies and scientific discoveries during the 1800s. Children's books had embraced them as symbols par excellence of metamorphosis, while butterfly and beetle collections, in the form of bizarre compositions guarded under bell jars, peeped out upon the shelves of fireplaces in aristocratic homes, and jewelery shaped like insects embellished ladies' *decoltés*, wrists and ear lobes. Furthermore, scholars, artists and scientists joined Napoleon's military campaign in Egypt (1798–1802), and were tasked with documenting Egyptian culture. The mission widely contributed to accentuating people's fascination with the land of the pharaohs and, above all, of beetles. The archaeological digs, which culminated in the discovery of the intact tomb of Tutankhamen in 1922, brought to light numerous beetle-shaped amulets. Dung beetles (*Scarabeus sacer*) had been worshipped since the fourth century BC as a symbol of rebirth and change on account of the similarity between the way it incessantly rolled faeces balls (to feed), and the way the sun god moved the sphere of fire in the sky. Beetles were produced in enamelled steatite, faience and semi-precious stones, and were a popular talisman to be worn around the neck and, after dying, to be inserted among the bandages around mummies. The wave of "Egyptmania" that shook nineteenth-century Europe was not limited to using the amulets found in Egyptian tombs or copying their iridescent silhouette in jewellery; the shells of actual beetles were mounted to form bracelets, necklaces and earrings. The unusual practice was already known to Ferrante Imperato who attributed therapeutic power to beetles mounted in gold or silver in his *Historia Naturale* (1682), although it certainly did not compare with the ancient Mayan tradition, still in use to the present day, of ornamenting the bodies of live beetles (*Zopherus chilensis*) with gold and precious stones and wearing them as jewellery by putting them on small chains and attaching them to clothes with a pin to stop them from flying.

The short-lived revival of the fashion in late nineteenth-century America was immediately frowned upon, although during the 1930s the dynamic and brilliant Elsa Schiaparelli, inspired by her encounters with the transgressive Surrealists, mounted beetles, flies and spiders in coloured metal in transparent plastic necklaces to simulate living insects climbing up the throat of the wearer. The use of so-called "living diamonds" also came from Latin America over the past few centuries: large fireflies were used to brighten up hairdos because of their fluorescence or, enclosed in tiny veil pouches, used as adornments for evening dresses.

In Victorian England, the elytra of beetles (*Buprestidae*) –

Fig. 1 - "Suffrage for both Sexes", *Punch*, April 2, 1870

the wing-cases protecting the very thin wings used for flying – were used as precious shimmering decorative pieces on dresses, stoles, purses and fans. An import record from 1867 for twenty-five thoursand elytra proves the fashion. In all likelihood they came from India, a country specialised in this kind of embellishment. Around two decades later, in 1888, the famous theatre actress Ellen Terry played Lady Macbeth at London's Lyceum Theatre wrapped in a glistening garment studded with a thousand shimmering beetles' wings. Bewitched by the beauty of the stage outfit that Alice Comyns Carr had created for her character, she wrote to her daughter: "I wish you could see my dresses. They are superb, especially the first one: green beetles on it, and such a cloak!". One quickly understands why the American painter John Singer Sargent, enchanted after having seen her on stage, immortalised her as a ruthless queen shrouded in glittering insects in a painting now at the Tate Gallery. The tradition of using elytra was brought back to life in the modern era by the Belgian artist Jan Fabre who, fascinated by entomology and the symbolic meaning attributed to beetles, ventured to create works of art, including sculpture-dresses, entirely covered by thousands of beetle wings.

A different fate awaited flies, which, in the collective imagination are perceived as small, bothersome and repugnant. It is therefore surprising to learn that in ancient times flies were viewed positively for qualities of heroism, boldness and temerity. In ancient Egypt, the pharaohs customarily paid tribute to brave soldiers who distinguished themselves in battle with necklaces embellished with gold flies, a reference to their courage, just like the unrelenting insect. Homer, though many centuries later, underlined the idea in the *Iliad* (sixth century BC) when he described how Athena, the goddess of war, had instilled the boldness of a fly in the heart of the heroic soldier Menelaus.

The origin of the negative connotation the insects still have to this day can undoubtedly be traced back to the Bible. In the *Book of Exodus* (8:24), one of the ten plagues is where the Lord punishes Egypt after his request to free the Jews had been ignored: "Dense swarms of flies poured into Pharaoh's palace and into the houses of his officials; throughout Egypt the land was ruined by the flies"; divine retribution that condemned the insect to everlasting infamy. And if at first the Greek writer Lucian's *In Praise of the Fly* (second century AD) seems to lack any contempt, it is actually a part of the literary genre, which, by celebrating subjects or circumstances that are normally scorned, allowed authors to show off their oratory talent.

The writer not only glorified, jokingly, the qualities and virtues of the insect, he even humanised it by making it superior to men. Following this *divertissement*, the erudite humanist Leon Battista Alberti, bed-stricken by fever, was given a Latin translation of Lucian's text by his friend Guarino Veronese, and in turn, delighted in composing a refined and wise elegy entitled *Musca* (1437). Christian imagery did not only denigrate the insect. In addition to associating it with the greatly scorned figure of Ba' al Zevùl, the god of fertility worshipped by the Canaanites, it altered the name to Ba' al Zevùv, that is, "Lord of the Flies", irritating and impure creatures. In the 1300s Dante in *Inferno* and Petrarch in *Canzoniere* presented the fly as the alter ego of Lucifer. A few centuries later Pierre Le Loyer, the first councillor to the King of France and expert occultist, was more specific in describing that, during an exorcism in Laon in 1566, Beelzebub, in the guise of a fly, flew out of the possessed woman's mouth.

Flying away from the pages of the Holy Scriptures, the fly, thanks to the skill and wit of Giotto, landed on the nose of a figure painted by his master Cimabue who, according to Giorgio Vasari in the *Lives* (1550), was deceived by the realism and tried to brush it away with his hand. In fifteenth-century art the *trompe l'œil* portrayal of the fly, wittily defined by André Chastel as an "unwanted visitor in the painting", was a pretext to show off naturalistic skill. In the 1600s it became a symbol of transience due to the brevity of its lifespan, and of death and decay because of the way it swiftly laid eggs on dead bodies. But during the 1700s, the insect threw off its role as a *memento mori* and took on an unexpectedly frivolous meaning: the term *mouches* was used to describe fake beauty marks made of black velvet or silk taffeta and applied to white skin, a fashion at the French court of Louis XV and soon widespread across Europe. The erotic value of this affectation was due to the belief that the face of Venus, the goddess of love, was softened by a beauty mark. Seen as jewels for the face, *mouches* were made in all kinds of shapes including circles, half moons, stars and hearts (an eighteenth-century set is in the Science Museum in London), and they commanded their own language. Depending on their position they conveyed messages on the personality or intentions of the person wearing them. Another connection to the body came in the form of the enormous fly brooch that the unpredictable Elsa Schiaparelli, gripped by Surrealist inspiration, created in 1952. The designer may have been influenced by the publication the same year of the memoirs of Misia Sert, a pianist and unrivalled muse of the Parisian avant-garde who, in a chapter dedicated to her childhood, wrote:

> One of the girls who shared my dormitory was a past-master at the art of catching flies. A persevering study of these insects made it possible for her to find the exact spot where she could dig in the pin so as to thread them without killing them. She wore these necklaces of living flies, and went onto ecstasies over the divine sensations provoked by the contact of their fluttering wings and wretched little legs with her skin.

A live fly necklace fluttering against the skin has undoubted erotic value, with a hint of sadism, but the British artist Damien Hirst provoked a completely different feeling through his recent use of the insects. Upon approaching his large seemingly monochrome canvases viewers discover that, besides the pungent smell, the colour black is not a pigment but rather is the result of thousands of dead flies stuck in the painting's resin. He uses the myriad of insect cadavers to convey, in a quite explicit manner, the idea of death in works with titles that leave no room for doubt: *The Last Judgement* (2002), *Holocaust* (2003–2004) and *Black Death* (2008). A decade earlier the idea of death and lifecycles had inspired his installation *A Thousand Years* (1990), an enormous glass display case containing the cut-off head of a cow dripping with blood and infested with a swarm of buzzing flies.

After Maffeo Barberini's election to the papacy in 1623 he took the name Pope Urban VIII and replaced the three flies on his family coat-of-arms, a reference to the original name Tafani da Barberino, with bees, to avoid any unwelcome implications. Ever since antiquity bees had been highly regarded as industrious, loyal and obedient. In ancient Egypt, they were seen as the incarnation of dead souls; in the *Iliad*, Homer compares the sweetness of their honey to the eloquence of great orators; and in the *Georgics* (first century BC), a poem dedicated to agricultural work, Virgil sings the praises of the bee community as an exemplary metaphor of the *res pubblica*. An even more meaningful consideration, especially as regards Pope Urban VIII's choice, was the parallel handed down by Christian tradition between the chaste, laborious and disciplined life in beehives and monasteries. In royal circles, however, bee symbology seems to derive from Aristotle who, deceived by the insect armed with a sting, he incorrectly claimed in *Historia animalium* (fourth century BC) that a king ruled over the entire hive. Centuries later, Pliny the Elder repeated the idea in *Naturalis Historia* (77–78 AD) when he wrote: "[...] without a king, in fact, they (bees) cannot exist" (XI:18). The symbolic meaning of the bees that stud the attire and harness of Louis XII's horse in the miniature portraying *Le Voyage de Gênes* (1532) becomes easy to understand; the manuscript celebrated the French king's rapid conquest of the Italian city in 1507. In 1609, supported by advances made in science, Charles Butler, a British reverend and experienced beekeeper, was able to refute the theory that a male bee ruled over all other bees in his treatise *The Feminine Monarchy*. The discovery of the queen-bee did not affect the deep-rooted symbolism of bees subject to patriarchal authority. In the 1800s Napoleon Bonaparte still wore capes embroidered with golden bees, an emblem of royal authority and, at the same time, a way to establish a direct bond with the ancient Merovingian dynasty whose tombs contained golden bees (which were actually cicadas). It should come as no surprise that Napoleon, condemned to exile in 1814, ordered a flag raised with three golden bees at the fort in Portoferraio before he landed on Elba as a reference to his power. He was also aware of the values of immortality and resurrection Egyptian culture attributed to the insects, and they became a brilliant ploy to emphasise his unwillingness to surrender.

Bees, through apiculture, were believed to be the only insects that could be domesticated by man. During the second half of the 1700s in London, bees became the protagonists of unusual performances that made Daniel and Thomas Wildman famous. Daniel presented himself to King George III standing on the back of a horse with bee wreaths hanging from his chin like a beard, and after he fired a pistol, the bees flew into the air and then formed a swarm. Thomas, who was also an expert acrobat, usually performed at Richard Astley's Riding School wearing a beard and wig made from bees. In addition to displaying their ability to courageously handle the insects, the performances implied man's authority over nature.

Believed to be the only female model acceptable to the ancient Greeks, or at least according to what Semonides wrote in the misogynist satire *Types of Women* (seventh century BC), the bee-woman (fig. 2), a loyal, chaste and wise bride as well as loving mother, possessed an antithetical nature compared to the nineteenth-century spider-woman, the incarnation par excellence of the *femme fatale* who, similar to the devil in luring to a web of sin, unleashed all her charm in trapping members of the opposite sex. This image must have derived from nature and entomology: some female spiders are known to devour their mates during or after copulation. In order to ward off this sad ending some male spiders, before impregnating the females, court them with a dance during which they spin some threads that immobilise the females or they offer them prey to fill them up and avoid being eaten. The concept of the preying spider is portrayed in the satirical drawing *The Corsican Spider in His Web* (1808) made when Napoleon, after having conquered Spain, was at the height of his power. The Emperor is depicted in the shape of a large spider with his typical feathered bicorn on his head and the writing "Unbounded Ambition" on his body. He stands out against a huge web, which traps flies that resemble subjected European rulers, and he is about to devour Charles IV of Spain and his son (fig. 3). The negative connotations attributed to spiders were not limited to the sexual sphere or a thirst for power. They had been thought to be poisonous since ancient times and the therapeutic healing ritual from a tarantula's deadly bite consisted in a wild dance that, going on for hours, could expel the toxic substance from the body through sweat. Only in recent times, and thanks to an American comic strip created in 1962, the spider seems to have been, at least somewhat, reinstated in the collective imagination. *Spiderman*, or the alter ego of the shy and clumsy Peter Parker, is a superhero who, accidentally bitten by a radioactive spider, acquires special powers like strength, speed, resistance and the ability to see into the future to fight

the criminals who threaten New York City. Occasionally, primal fear of spiders led to mischievous situations. In the early 1600s, the Elector Christian II of Saxony is said to have had fun scaring the guests who visited his *Wunderkammer* by activating a spider automaton, made by the court artist Tobias Reichel, that was as big as the palm of a hand and could, by moving its slender legs, imitate a spider's movements. Interestingly, almost three centuries later the French naturalist and entomologist Jean-Henri Fabre concluded his numerous studies to ascertain if the actions of insects were guided by instinct or intelligence by comparing them to automatons in *Souvenirs Entomologiques* (1879–1900). Besides fear, spiders continue to arouse wonder and amazement for their innate ability to weave webs, creating threads five times stronger than steel; the webs Primo Levi called "methodical geometries". In Greek mythology the unrivalled weaving skill of Arachne, a mortal who dared challenge and surpass the goddess Athena, was punished by being turned into a spider and condemned to weave with her mouth. Louise Bourgeois's gigantic and terrifying metal sculptures allude to this archetype. Emblematically titled *Maman* (1999), the arachnids' long protective legs pay homage to her mother who earned a living weaving and repairing tapestries.

Fig. 2 - 'Bee' dress, from the film *Angels & Insects*, 1995

What can be said about the graceful, ethereal and elegant butterfly? Seeping into childhood imagination through stories like *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) – where a blue caterpillar smoking a hookah and resting on a mushroom cap changes into a butterfly – or fairy tales full of fairies with delicate wings, the insect has been a symbol par excellence of metamorphosis and the soul since ancient times due to its transformation from caterpillar to chrysalis to butterfly.

In *Purgatory* (X:125), Dante compares the soul to "an angelic butterfly" that flies towards Divine Justice, and in the Renaissance, painting masters like Andrea Mantegna and Raphael depict putti or female mythological figures with multi-coloured butterfly wings. In the Victorian era, widespread "insectmania" led many collectors to embark on long and dangerous journeys to distant lands where they could catch rare and unusual butterflies. Margaret Elizabeth Fountaine was an important collector from the time. The unconventional English entomologist dared challenge the morals and norms of the period by traveling alone or in the company of a man who was not her husband as she strove to capture lepidoptera to add to her collection. When she died her diligently catalogued collection contained twenty-two thousand butterflies. During the same period of time, the Danish writer Hans Christian Andersen told the story of an inconstant lepidopteron that couldn't settle on a bride in the ironic fairy tale *The Butterfly*, and then, after banging into a window-pane, being captured and stuck on a pin in a box of curiosities, he consoled himself, muttering: "I should imagine it is something like being married; for here I am stuck fast!".

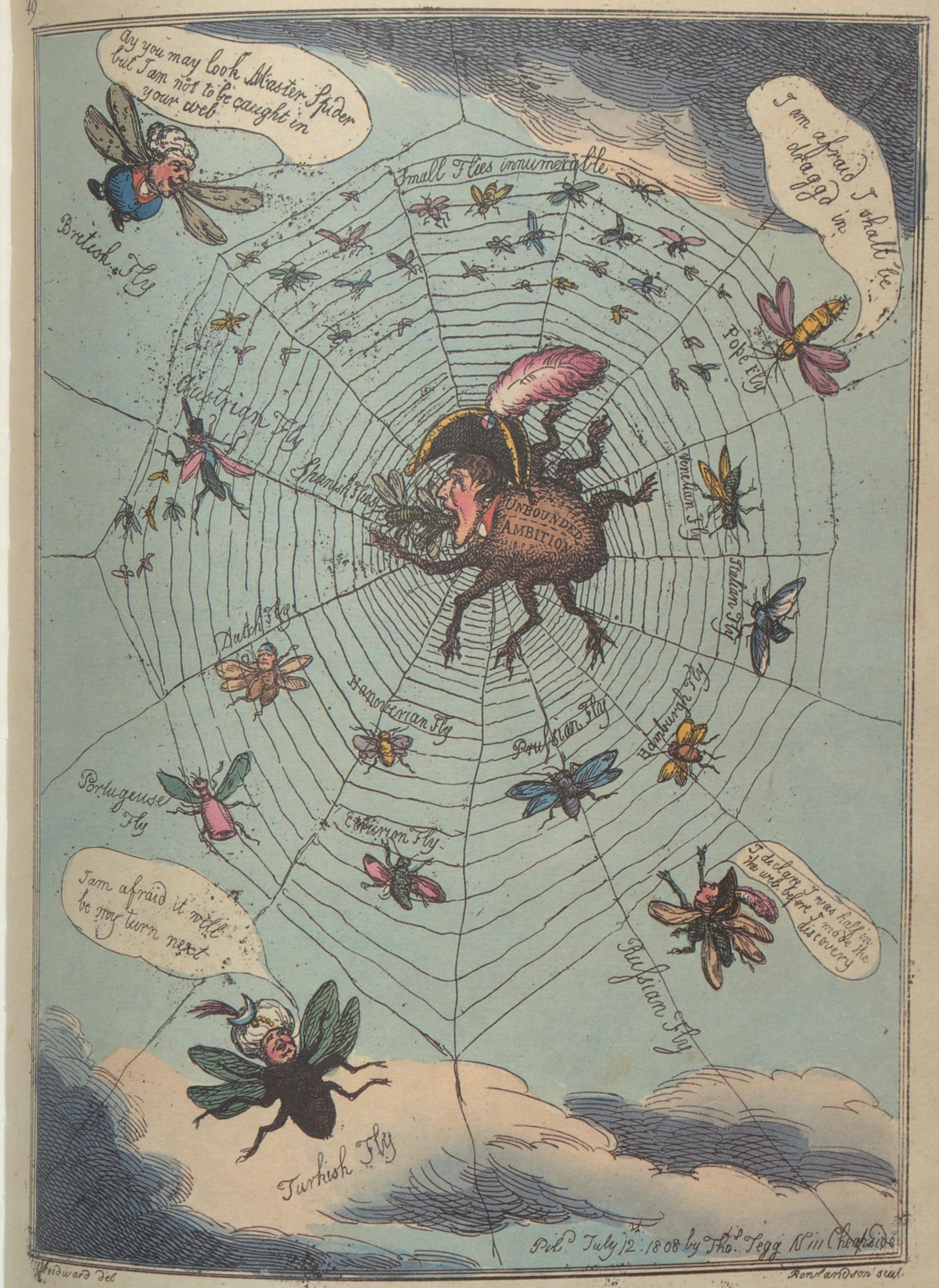

Fig. 3 -Thomas Rowlandson, *The Corsican Spider in His Web*, 12 July 1808